

How to Build a Successful Scout Platoon

by Sergeant First Class Shawn E. Wallace

SITUATION: You are a newly assigned scout platoon sergeant to TF 03-00 and your unit has just deployed to CMTC for the first time in a year. The task force mission is to attack in zone. The time is 0530 and the TF commander has just received his brief from the S2 on the reconnaissance effort. The scout platoon was assigned four NAIs (Named Areas of Interest) in zone; out of the four patrols tasked:

- One is confirmed destroyed in a minefield.
- One had to return to his vehicle hide after moving six kilometers to change out his short whip antenna with a long whip.
- Third patrol's plugger battery has died and they're without a compass, reporting enemy locations by sending wrong grids.
- There's been no comms with the last patrol in four hours and, by the way, the TF commander just found out that the PL is with this patrol.

Unfortunately, too many times, this same or similar scenario plays out here at CMTC and, when leadership is asked what happened and why, it's almost always the same answer. The TF gave us a messed-up mission, undo-able, or nobody listens to us. My question is WHY? In this article, I'm going to identify the WHY and also how we can fix it.

The single best way to prevent this kind of report is through training. Scout platoons come to the CMTC undermanned mainly because soldiers do not reenlist to be scouts. The scout platoon is viewed as the detail platoon or sacrificial lambs when it becomes time for the unit to conduct its mission. As an O/C monitoring the scout reporting nets, the spot reports are scrutinized in such a manner that the report becomes old and changes seem unbelievable (i.e., scouts report BMPs at a specific location, and the confusion infiltrates in



Photo by Robert L. Stevenson

when the report doesn't match the S2's enemy sittemp).

MISSION: Build a successful scout platoon. The scout platoon sergeant has a very important job. He has to train a platoon leader coming from a tank or infantry platoon. The PSG also is responsible for the motivation, morale, discipline, accountability, serviceability, and training of all soldiers and equipment in his platoon.

In my experience, as a scout from squad leader to PSG, building a successful scout platoon greatly depends on three areas: assessment, training, and validation. The worst thing we can do is jump into this new position and make corrections in areas that are not broken. This not only undermines your subordinate leadership, but it also builds a wall between you and your soldiers that says, it's all about me, your ideas are appreciated but not welcome.

EXECUTION: Assessment, training, and validation phases.

ASSESSMENT PHASE

Shortly after assignment as a scout PSG, it is imperative that you begin an immediate assessment in the following areas:

1. Physical fitness – Administer a diagnostic PT test and observe your platoon's strengths and weaknesses.

This also marks your starting point for daily physical fitness. Set challenging but realistic platoon goals, and don't stop until you hit the mark. Provide incentives and reward soldiers with high PT scores; it challenges the others to do better.

2. Small arms marksmanship – Set up an M16 range and have everyone in your platoon qualify at the same time, whether they need it or not. This allows you not only to get everyone in tolerance, but it also allows you to see the level of excellence at which your platoon can run a range.

Take the time to get one-on-one with your soldiers who have problems qualifying.

3. Navigation – Withhold all pluggers from the platoon for a time period. Set up a land navigation course, with different day and night runs, and break the platoon into two-man teams with comms. Give the task, conditions, and standards, and run the course. This allows you to see your strengths and weaknesses in NCOs and juniors and how to direct your training. Afterwards, place your strong navigators with the weak. Once a month, send them out to retrain.

4. Team building – Set up a 12-mile road march course with a detailed and challenging packing list, and break the platoon down into their sections. Give different incentives for best times, stagger their start times, and run the course. This will allow you to see how well your NCOs conduct PCIs (Pre-Combat Inspections) and PCCs (Pre-Combat Checks).

5. Living area – Give your soldiers their private space IAW the single soldier policy. At the same time, standardize some things across the board, i.e., a clean and healthy environment; then hold them accountable. It's very important to treat **all** your soldiers as men and women and not kids; they're our future NCOs.

"This scout lane should take at least five days to run, however, train to the standard and not to time. Remember the art to learning is through repetition...."

6. Off-post home visit – Make appointments to visit your soldiers' homes off post and spend no more than 20 minutes per visit. Meet their spouses. See how your soldiers live, and ask both wives and soldiers if they have any problems with their home or landlord. When visiting junior soldiers, take the section sergeant with you. Insist, no meals! Soldiers don't care how much you know, until they see how much you care.

TRAINING PHASE

The crawl, walk, run approach to training is one of the best ways to get everyone, down to your juniors, on the same sheet of music.

1. Crawl phase:

The PSG is the primary instructor for every class. On occasions, coordinate classes to be taught by subject matter experts (i.e., mortar NCO on call for fire and S2 on the scout role as an intelligence collection asset, the importance of accurate reports and IPB). The scout platoon should train on everything from tactics, techniques, and battle drills, including all seven forms of actions on contact:

- 1) Direct fire
- 2) Indirect fire
- 3) Red air
- 4) Obstacles
- 5) NBC
- 6) Radio jamming
- 7) Chance contact

Thoroughly teach and test reports. Scouts must send timely and accurate reports. Schedule a call for fire trainer or set one up at your LTA (Local Training Area): a hill, a HMMWV with a plugger and smoke to mark the area called, and a target HMMWV. **Scouts must be proficient on call for fire.**

The platoon's SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) is now under construction or revision based on whether the platoon already has an SOP.

2. Walk phase:

Gather all materials needed and construct a sand table box for future missions. Show the platoon what scout movement techniques look like on the table. Go over battle drills and report formats just like you would mounted.

The art of learning is through repetition.

Establish the scout platoon **PCI** and give the platoon a mission to bring in all designated items on a packing list. Establish a checklist for your leaders and an SOP for your vehicle load plan. Settle for nothing less than what is published. Consider tactical movement and safety. Always remember the doer will do what the checker will check.

Oversee your scout platoon's maintenance program, ensure it's being done IAW the TM. Develop a good working relationship with the mechanics and stay on top of parts ordered and dead-lined vehicles. Always reinforce the crew's responsibilities.

Mount up and take the scout platoon to the LTA and go over section movement techniques, battle drills, actions on contact, casualty evacuation, assembly area procedures, and the importance of security IAW *FM 17-98*. Get the platoon used to responding to **FRAGOS**, and not just reacting to them. **No opposition needed.**

The scout platoon should have a standard way they do business, OP (Observation Post) occupation, crossing danger areas, clearing ORPs (Objective Rally Points), and OBJs (Objectives), establishing TRPs (Target Reference Points) and triggers, use of range cards and sector sketches.

Get your leadership used to conducting their **TLPs** (Troop Leading Procedures) in a timely manner. Conduct a good map recon and plan routes using IPB (Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield) (think like the enemy) so danger areas are avoided or approached with caution.

Establish a scout platoon **battle book** with a skeleton operations order, WARNO (Warning Order), and all needed reports. This book will also include coordinating instructions and questions for passage of lines, and coordinating with adjacent units.

REHEARSE, REHEARSE, REHEARSE!

3. Run phase:

Establish scout platoon section STX (Situational Training Exercise) lanes at the LTA. Use either internal assets or coordinate this training with other TF

scouts. When using internal assets, break the platoon down into their four respective sections. Build two scout lanes IAW the scout MTP (Mission Training Plan), two sections will provide opposition, one section will be in the prep phase, and the other in the execution phase. Ensure you have different scenarios for each section.

The PL will give an OPORD (Operations Order) to the section in the prep phase, and the section sergeant will begin to prepare for his mission. Base areas to be trained on the strengths and weaknesses of the platoon. The PL and PSG will shadow the section as it negotiates the course to provide feedback and C2.

The lane will have no less than the following: control measures, an obstacle, an enemy OP, an enemy patrol, an objective with targets for fire missions.

This scout lane should take at least five days to run; however, train to the standard and not to time. Remember the art to learning is through repetition. Don't settle for anything less than a **T** in execution. The PL and PSG will conduct a hot wash AAR upon completion of the course.

The scout lane should be run both mounted and dismounted to develop infiltration techniques.

When the scout lane runs with another scout platoon, the same concept is used, except you have the capability to build a longer lane with more scenarios and opposition.

Always train individual tasks at crew level. Train section tasks at platoon level, and train platoon tasks at TF level.

4. Validation phase:

Upon completion of the run phase, publish a working copy of the scout platoon SOP. The scouts should now be ready to validate their training. NTC, JROTC, and CMTC will provide that validation. During the validation phase, take notes and make refinements.

Scout gunnery is a special area of emphasis on which the scout PSG and PL focus. With the aid of a master gunner, together IAW *FM 17-12-8*, the light scout gunnery field manual, or *FM 23-1*, the Bradley Fighting Vehicle gunnery manual, establish a training

program. The PSG takes the time to plan and execute gunnery skills training at individual and crew level. All ranges and ammo are forecast and scheduled three to six months in advance with range control and S4.

Now, the scout platoon SOP is proofed and ready for print. This SOP includes, but is not limited to, garrison duties of reception and integration, to tactical operations, to deployment operations. The scout platoon SOP is designed to standardize the way the platoon does business. A new soldier should be able to read this SOP and understand how to plan and prepare for future operations.

Conclusion

This article outlines a technique I have successfully used as a scout PSG. Everything mentioned above is incorporated with a will to learn, hard work, discipline, and no tolerance for failure due to incompetence.

Your soldiers will learn to work a couple of skill levels higher than their present level.

Always prepare and train as you will fight! Keep your equipment as though you are the ready platoon in DRF 1; settle for nothing less. Your soldiers will become so well rounded and flexible that they will be able to quickly adapt to any situation.

SFC Shawn E. Wallace enlisted in the army in 1982 as a cavalry scout. He has served as a squad leader, section sergeant, platoon sergeant, S2 NCOIC, drill sergeant, observer controller, and instructor. His assignments include: 1/9th Cav, Ft. Hood; 1-72 AR, Camp Casey; 2/9th Cav Ft. Stewart; 3/11th ACR, Germany; 3-73 AR, Ft. Bragg; 2/13th Inf, Ft. Jackson; 2/5 Cav and 2/8 Cav, Ft. Hood; and CMTC, Hohenfels, Germany. His military schools include: Airborne, Air Assault, Drill Sergeant, NCO Battle Staff, NBC, Opposing Forces Weapons Course, Light Armor Vehicle Course, PLDC, BNCOC, ANCOG, ITC, and SGI. Currently, he works as an ANCOG instructor at the NCO Academy at Fort Knox, Ky.